

THE CREDIBILITY OF THE MIRACULOUS

by John C. Polkinghorne

Abstract. *Miracle* in a strict sense is to be discriminated from acts of special providence by its being radically unnatural in terms of prior expectation. The key issue in relation to credibility is theological in character, inasmuch as divine consistency must imply that miracles are capable of being understood as “signs,” affording deeper insight into the divine care for creation. These issues are explored by reference to scriptural miracles, particularly the virginal conception and the resurrection of Christ.

Keywords: divine consistency; David Hume; miracle; providence; resurrection; virginal conception.

Gone are the days when accounts of miracles could be appealed to as unproblematic authentications of claims to special status. John Locke could accept the scriptural miracles as providing evidence reinforcing the reasonableness of Christianity, but his successor in the British empiricist philosophical tradition, David Hume, cast a decidedly skeptical eye on such stories. Adopting the definition of miracle as a violation of the laws of nature, Hume considered these laws so well established by repeated experience that there could never be evidence sufficiently strong to convince one that a violation of them had occurred. For Hume the notion of miracles was simply incoherent, and the possibility of their having happened could be rejected on a priori grounds, without any need to take evidential claims seriously into account.

This Enlightenment confidence that people knew how nature worked was scarcely to be borne out by the subsequent scientific discoveries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The picture that contemporary physics gives of natural process is one of substantial regularity, within which,

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nevertheless, there are extensive regions of intrinsic unpredictability. Whatever the character of the physical world may actually be, it is not a world of mere mechanism, as so much eighteenth-century thinking after Isaac Newton had supposed to be the case. This recognition has recently prompted, within the science-and-theology community, intensive discussion of how one might conceive of divine providential action as operating in the world (Polkinghorne 1998, chap. 3; Russell, Murphy, and Peacocke 1995). A variety of proposals have been made relating to the way one might think of agency, whether human or divine, as being exercised within a subtle and supple account of physical process. These metaphysical speculations are of considerable relevance to theology's task of contemplating God's providential activity within the unfolding history of creation. Yet they do not offer a prospect of explaining miracle, understood in the radical sense in which Hume and many subsequent thinkers have treated the issue. No one supposes that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, never to die again, by some clever exploitation of quantum theory or of chaos theory. A much more startling claim is being made in that Christian statement of belief. On the whole, this radically different character of miracle has resulted in a degree of wariness, in the science-and-theology community at large, about addressing the subject.

Etymologically, a miracle is simply an astonishing event that induces amazement in those that behold it or come to learn about it. This sense of extreme wonder might arise in three logically distinct ways.

1. *Normal human powers greatly enhanced in effect in a particular instance.* All of us can do a little mental arithmetic, but there are some persons who manifest astonishing calculating powers in that they can multiply two seven-figure numbers in their heads and produce the correct result almost instantaneously. We may loosely call such feats "miraculous," though there is, of course, nothing contrary to nature that is occurring in them. It is just that an exceptional degree of human ability is being manifested.

There is much evidence to suggest that some people possess the power to enable psychosomatic healing in others. Believing that Jesus possessed this power to a supreme degree would help us to understand at least some of the healing stories that are integral to the Gospel accounts. Such healings would be the results of a kind of enhanced naturalism.

2. *Significant coincidences.* Many people have had experiences in which two happenings, each perfectly natural and unremarkable in itself, coincide in a way that produces an occurrence that is perceived as significant for the participant. As an example, consider the following train of events: A band of fleeing slaves, hotly pursued by their masters, approaches a tract of marshy ground that threatens to block their escape. As they approach, a wind blows up that drives back the waters, with the result that the slaves are able to hurry across. The wind then drops, and the waters return and engulf the pursuers. A neutral observer cannot be compelled to see more

happening here than a remarkably fortunate coincidence; a fleeing Israelite equally cannot be forbidden to see in this occurrence a great act of divine deliverance from slavery in Egypt. From our modern point of view, it is possible to suppose that God was indeed active in such an event, perhaps exercising the power of divine providence along the lines indicated briefly above in the speculations about divine action. It is interesting that the account of the Exodus incident mentions both an act of God and the effect of a strong east wind (Exodus 14:21).

It is possible to understand some of the nature miracles in the gospels, such as the stilling of the storm on the Lake of Galilee (Mark 4:35–41), as also being striking coincidences brought about by divine action. In this view, these events, though astonishing and powerfully significant, are consequences of God's special providential interaction with creation rather than miracles in the stricter sense of their involving an apparent violation of a law of nature. These events are indeed brought about by God, but they take place within the normal grain of nature rather than in any contradiction to it.

3. *Radically "unnatural" events.* There remain stories of miraculous happenings that are so flatly contrary to normal expectation that they cannot be contained within any plausible extrapolation of science's account of the way the world works. These events Hume considered to be so clearly impossible that he declined to take into account any evidence for their occurrence, however detailed and circumstantial it might be. For the Christian, the pivotal miracle of this radical kind is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, understood as being his exaltation by God, after his death, to a new, glorified, and unending life. Many Christians, including the present writer, couple this with a belief that Jesus' tomb was found to be empty the first Easter Day—with the implication that Christ's risen body is the eschatological transmutation of his dead body (see Polkinghorne 1994, 115–18). If such an event really occurred, it could only credibly be as the consequence of a direct exercise of divine power in a wholly new and unprecedented way.

Making this claim points us to what is the central issue in relation to belief in the miraculous, understood in the strict sense, and that is the issue of *divine consistency*. The essential problem is not scientific in character—for, strictly speaking, science is incapable of adjudicating claims for the occurrence of unique events (though, of course, the extent to which science discerns the existence of normal regularities will certainly encourage the most scrupulous care in assessing assertions that such unique exceptions have taken place). The real problem is theological. It is theologically inconceivable that God acts as a capricious magician or conjurer, doing something today that God did not think of doing yesterday and will not be bothered to do again tomorrow. So, the question of divine consistency is the central problem to address in relation to the credibility of the miraculous.

Yet we must remember that this divine consistency is the consistency of a "person" (in some stretched and analogical sense), not the unrelenting regularity of a force, such as the force of gravity. The latter is insensitive and indifferent to both context and character, acting equally to maintain the earth in its orbit around the sun and to bring about the death of a person who falls from the top of a high cliff. Personal consistency is quite different in its character, adjusting to the idiosyncrasy of circumstance. In unprecedented situations, persons may act in quite unexpected ways, as when a quiet and apparently unexceptional person acts with surprising and impressive heroism in entering a burning building to rescue a trapped child. Divine consistency certainly does not consign God never to do something radically new.

In this connection, we need to recognize that a proper evaluation of miracle requires an accurate understanding of what it means to speak of the almightiness of divine power. It is not enough to argue, in a crude way, that if God is the Creator of the world God can bring about anything in that world that God fancies, whether it corresponds to happenings that have many precedents or to a miraculous happening that has no precedent at all. Such thinking fails to take account of the important theological principle that, although divine action is not externally constrained by an intrinsic power of resistance possessed by creatures, it is internally constrained, within the divine nature itself, by the fact that God will neither will nor do anything that is not in accord with the divine character. The good God cannot do evil deeds; the rational God cannot act irrationally. The God of love who has given a measure of independence to creatures will not arbitrarily withdraw that gift. There is a degree of theological incoherence in supposing that the Ordainer of the laws of nature will simply act against those laws, just as there is a degree of human hubris in supposing that at any time we have complete knowledge of what those laws must imply in all conceivable circumstances. The search to maintain the concept of divine consistency in our thinking about the miraculous is the search for a profound concept of God's action, capable of embracing general providence (the upholding of creation), special providence (operating within the open grain of history), and miracle (radically unprecedented), within a single integrated account of divine activity.

Thinking about the laws of physics can give us a simple model for how deep underlying consistency can be combined with the most surprising variations of consequence. Normally, the laws of electromagnetism and quantum theory result in the behavior of metals that we call Ohm's Law. The consequent effect of electrical resistance is to require that, when a current flows in a circuit, there be present a proportionate electromotive force, able to drive the current, a result that every high school student will have verified in the laboratory. But for some metals, in the new regime represented by extremely low temperatures, the consequence of these same

basic laws of physics is totally different. In the superconducting state of matter, resistance vanishes, and a current flows for many hours without needing any electromotive force to maintain its circulation. The fundamental laws of physics are the same in this new regime as they are in the high school laboratory, but the consequences of that underlying consistency are entirely different in the two cases.

Here is a metaphorical representation of the way in which the theologian should approach the issue of the miraculous. If it is true that God was in Christ in an unprecedented way, different from the divine presence in any other person, it is a coherent possibility that the “new regime” that Jesus represented could have been accompanied by new phenomena, even to the point of his being raised from the dead. The Christian understands Christ’s resurrection as being the seminal event from which God’s great eschatological act of the new creation has begun to grow. What is seen as being truly exceptional in Christ’s resurrection is that it took place *within* history, as the foretaste and guarantee of a postmortem destiny that awaits all other people beyond history: “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:22 NRSV). From this perspective it is possible, I believe, to see a theological consistency attaching to the claim of the miracle of the resurrection, understood as being the start of a great new divine act. Thus, we are freed to weigh positively the significant evidence (the appearance stories, the empty-tomb stories, and the striking post-Easter transformation of the disciples, all considered in a careful way) as pointing to an event that actually happened (Polkinghorne 1994, chap. 6).

An important way of speaking of these matters is afforded by the Johannine language that describes miracles as “signs” (*semeia*). Miracles are not just divine tours de force but events that serve as windows enabling us to look deeper into the character of God’s will for creation—just as the phenomenon of superconductivity taught us something about the deeper consequences of electromagnetism and quantum theory that we could not have learned in any other way. Adequate human understanding of divine power and divine intentions cannot be gleaned from everyday experience alone. On this view, miracles serve as a significant component of God’s self-revelation, acting not as unchallengeable endorsements but as the indispensable means by which certain kinds of truth can only be conveyed. Once again, Christ’s resurrection is the paradigm example.

In fact, it seems to me that the resurrection is the easiest miracle in which to believe, for it is straightforward and clear what the point of it was. What, then, are we to make of other miracle stories, equally radically unnatural, such as turning water into wine or feeding five thousand people with five loaves and some small fishes? The latter is, perhaps, the most difficult to picture of all of the Gospel miracle stories, as the sparsity of its representation in Christian art indicates. Yet it is also the only miracle performed by Jesus that is clearly recounted in all four Gospels. Attempts

to “naturalize” it—to suggest that the little boy’s generosity shamed others who had been concealing their picnics into producing their food for general sharing around—seem lame. One of the difficulties in assessing the historicity of the feeding of the multitude is its clear significance in relation both to the Jewish expectation of the Messianic Banquet and to the Christian experience of the Eucharist, so that one must consider the possibility that it is a symbolic story that got into the tradition as if it were an actual event. Different theologians will judge this matter differently. It is characteristic of a number of miracle stories, scriptural or otherwise, that some degree of variety and ambiguity exists in the Christian response to them.

Similar considerations apply to the miracle story that, in my experience, is the one most frequently raised and questioned in discussions with a scientific audience: the turning of water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana in Galilee. At a prosaic level of interpretation, it seems like an over-response to a mild social difficulty. At the deeper, symbolic level (suggested by the water jugs’ being referred to as “for the Jewish rites of purification” [John 2:6]), the story is a powerful way of emphasizing the difference that the presence of Jesus makes. Was it then an actual miraculous event, or is it a symbolic story presented as if it really happened? Once again, Christian interpretations differ. Augustine saw the story in terms of a supernaturally accelerated naturalism: what takes months to accomplish in the setting of the vineyard is achieved in a moment at the Lord’s command (Polkinghorne 1989, 47). This assimilation of the supernatural to the natural is not, at least in this case, easily available to us today. Our understanding of the nature of biochemical processes and their natural time scales prevents our embracing the notion that they can readily be speeded up or that water provides sufficient chemical resources to yield alcohol. One might wonder, however, whether Augustine’s idea has relevance to the remarkable incidents of accelerated healing that Terence Nichols recounts in his paper (2002; see pp. 703–15 in this issue).

A particularly interesting case is provided by the traditional understanding that Jesus was virginally conceived. Compared with the resurrection, the virginal conception plays a much smaller explicit role in the New Testament writings, and the scriptural testimony to its occurrence is much more limited (Polkinghorne 1994, 143–45). Many theologians would see the point of the story as lying in its expressing an affirmation that both human and divine initiatives were involved in the birth of Jesus, the one who was to be Lord and Christ. Does the virginal conception then need to be something that actually happened, or would telling the tale suffice to make the point symbolically? Because I personally understand the central significance of the Incarnation to be precisely the fusion of the power of myth and the power of history, so that it concerns an actual divine participation in the process of creation, I am disposed, for this theological reason, to accept that the virginal conception was an actual miraculous event.

As far as particular instances are concerned, the discussion so far has concentrated on scriptural miracles. Similar considerations, however, would apply more generally to claims for the occurrence of miraculous events at other times and places. Two criteria continue to play an essential role in any assessment. One is that, to be theologically credible, the event must carry clear significance. In a word, it must be capable of functioning as a sign. Stories of remarkable healings may be thought to fulfil this requirement rather easily. Other stories—of levitations, for example—may seem to be more odd than significant, and consequently they give rise to greater skepticism or perplexity.

The other criterion applies to appropriateness of context. Nichols emphasizes that the Roman Catholic Church will take seriously a miraculous claim only if it is demonstrated that the event took place in a setting of deep faith and prayer. There also may be other contextual factors to consider. C. S. Lewis wrote, “God does not shake miracles at Nature at random as if from a pepper-castor. They come on great occasions: they are found at the great ganglia of history—not of political or social history, but of that spiritual history which cannot be fully known by men. . . . Miracles and martyrdoms tend to bunch together about the same areas of history” (Lewis 1947, 201).

Miracles, if they occur, must be rare events. The perplexity remains why, if God does indeed sometimes act in exceptional ways that profoundly manifest divine care for creation, these events are so *exceptionally* rare. There seem to be so many occasions that cry out for divine action of this dramatic kind. If God can work miracles, why did God not do so to prevent the Holocaust? The problems of theodicy, of which these agonizing queries are a particular case, do not lend themselves to any simple resolution.

There is no escape from mysteries that go with the strange diversity of human destinies in this life. The foregoing reflections on sensitivity to context may have some significance in relation to these issues, but no one could claim that the matter is transparent. Neither should one assert, however, that God’s consistent exercise of power is so constrained that the divine will cannot bring about unprecedented events in unprecedented circumstances.

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